

Metadata of the chapter that will be visualized online

Chapter Title	Jay Belsky
Copyright Year	2016
Copyright Holder	Springer International Publishing AG
Corresponding Author	Family Name King Particle Given Name Robert Suffix Division School of Applied Psychology Organization University College Cork Address Cork, Ireland Email r.king@ucc.ie
Abstract	Developmental psychology; Evolutionary psychology; Father absence; Life history theory

1 **J**

2 **Jay Belsky**

3 Robert King
 4 School of Applied Psychology, University
 5 College Cork, Cork, Ireland

6 **Synonyms**

7 [Developmental psychology](#); [Evolutionary psy-](#)
 8 [chology](#); [Father absence](#); [Life history theory](#)

9 **Definition**

10 Predictions about how cues to accelerated life
 11 history will be visible in maturation.

12 **Introduction**

13 Jay Belsky had a breakthrough moment – in his
 14 own words “the best idea I would ever
 15 have” – early in his career while teaching a grad-
 16 uate seminar. Having been trained in traditional
 17 developmental psychological theories (Freudian,
 18 attachment theory, and social learning theory) he
 19 was familiar with the idea that good developmen-
 20 tal trajectories followed naturally from positive
 21 parental involvement. Parents who were respon-
 22 sive, financially and emotionally secure, and pos-
 23 sessed of an acceptable level of intellectual and
 24 social skills would produce children who were

similarly capable of love and social interaction 25
 in later life. A paper by colleague Pat Draper 26
 (Draper and Harpending 1988) changed all that. 27
 Viewed from the perspective of life history theory, 28
 human notions of good and bad parenting take a 29
 back seat to effectiveness of passing genes on to 30
 the next generation – and this is true whether you 31
 are a human or a haddock. Viewed through this 32
 radical lens, violent and abusive human parents 33
 are preparing their offspring for a world where 34
 trust and love will not be rewarded. The fact of 35
 this being a social and moral evil says nothing 36
 about its being a reproductive dead end. This 37
 perspective, life history theory, has informed 38
 most of Belsky’s subsequent work. 39

Life History Theory 40

Life history theory is a set of well-validated 41
 interlocking biological predictions about the dif- 42
 ferential allocation of resources to different 43
 fitness-related aspects of an organism’s needs 44
 throughout its life. It is well-validated across a 45
 huge range of taxa. At the most basic level, organ- 46
 isms can be impelled down slow or fast life history 47
 paths. Slow paths are ones that emphasize greater 48
 time taken to reach maturity, the low acceptability 49
 of risk, and other modifications to take advantage 50
 of a predictable and supportive environment. On 51
 the other hand, fast life histories are favored in 52
 risky, dangerous environments where ultimate fit- 53
 ness is increased by maturing early and favouring 54

55 reproductive quantity over quality. From a gene's
 56 eye perspective, either set of strategies is as good
 57 as the other – both have been favored by selection
 58 to maximize fitness (Stearns 1976).

59 **Human Development**

60 Humans are obligate investors, and even mini-
 61 mum parental investment is still considerable.
 62 That said, there is plenty of opportunity for par-
 63 ents to cue offspring to a life of likely threats or
 64 opportunities. What Belsky realized was that what
 65 was traditionally regarded as bad parenting – e.g.,
 66 unresponsive care-giving, spousal abuse, and fre-
 67 quent conflict was resulting in developmental tra-
 68 jectories that likely maximized that child's fitness
 69 later in life.

70 This concept is not unknown to popular cul-
 71 ture. In the classic country and western song "A
 72 Boy Named Sue," the father abandons his son at
 73 age three after naming him in a way that will
 74 ensure daily conflict. When they meet, later in
 75 life, and fight, they are reconciled over the reali-
 76 zation that this treatment toughened the son up for
 77 the life he was to lead – the song even mentions
 78 his speed of maturation. This pattern (minus the
 79 sentimental reconciliation) is a distillation of
 80 Belsky's key insight as it pertains to what others
 81 would regard as developmental insults. Specifi-
 82 cally, early maturation should be predictable from
 83 what others would regard as bad parenting
 84 (Belsky et al. 1991).

85 The implications of this are profound. The
 86 organism can be viewed as a fitness maximizer
 87 who can be conceptualized as saying (not consci-
 88 ously) to itself, "given that I am born into an
 89 environment that is harsh and unforgiving, in
 90 which I can't take my time to choose the best
 91 mate, ensure mutual commitment, and invest
 92 time and energy in healthy pursuits and a small
 93 number of much cared for children; my best repro-
 94 ductive bet is to start reproducing early, be a lot
 95 less choosy about with whom I do this, and have
 96 as many offspring as possible given that their
 97 chances of survival to reproductive maturity are
 98 so much less than they could be in this
 99 untrustworthy and unpredictable world." The

question then is – what sort of early cues might
 100 set humans down one path rather than another.
 101 Given the need for biparental investment in our
 102 ancestral past, Belsky and others (e.g., Belsky
 103 et al. 1991) hypothesized that father absence in
 104 key developmental periods would predict earlier
 105 maturation.
 106

107 These sorts of predictions have been confirmed
 108 strongly in females, but this is only part of the
 109 story. The mechanisms are far from perfect, and
 110 early calibrations of organisms to their likely envi-
 111 ronments might go awry. Genes that underlie
 112 these mechanisms may thus increase their fitness
 113 by hedging their bets somewhat. This results in a
 114 set of hypotheses about differential individual
 115 susceptibility (Belsky et al. 2007). The observed
 116 effect of this is that some children are likely to
 117 appear more resilient to early markers of abuse
 118 than others. This is what we do find. Some chil-
 119 dren are highly reactive – with certain gene
 120 markers underlying these individual
 121 differences – and these children do both especially
 122 poorly in adverse conditions and especially well
 123 in supportive ones (Belsky 2012; Belsky and
 124 Pluess 2013).

125 **Conclusion**

126 Belsky has summed up these insights in terms of
 127 "biological gravity." Engineers cannot ignore the
 128 force of gravity when designing a building. Evo-
 129 lution is, similarly, a force that cannot be ignored
 130 when considering how biological organisms are
 131 designed. And, ultimately – this is cashed out in
 132 terms of differential survival of genes. The nature/
 133 nurture debate itself needs to grow up.

134 **Cross-References**

- ▶ [Life History Theory](#) 135
- ▶ [Parental Investment Theory](#) 136

137 **References**

- 138 Belsky, J. (2012). The development of human reproductive
139 strategies: Progress and prospects. *Current Directions*
140 *in Psychological Science, 21*, 310–316.
- 141 Belsky, J., & Pluess, M. (2013). Beyond risk, resilience and
142 dysregulation: Phenotypic plasticity and human devel-
143 opment. *Development and Psychopathology, 25*,
144 1243–1261.
- 145 Belsky, J., Steinberg, L., & Draper, P. (1991). Childhood
146 experience, interpersonal development, and
reproductive strategy: An evolutionary theory of 147
socialization. *Child development, 62*(4), 647–670. 148
- Belsky, J., Bakermans-Kranenburg, M., & van Ijzendoorn, 149
M. (2007). For better *and* for worse: Differential sus- 150
ceptibility to environmental influences. *Current Direc- 151*
tions in Psychological Science, 16, 305–309. 152
- Draper, P., & Harpending, H. (1988). A sociobiological 153
perspective on the development of human reproductive 154
strategies. Anthropology Faculty Publications, 11. 155
- Stearns, S. C. (1976). Life-history tactics: A review of the 156
ideas. *Quarterly Review of Biology, 3*–47. 157



Uncorrected Proof

Author Queries

Encyclopedia of Evolutionary Psychological Science
Chapter No: 1928-1

Query Refs.	Details Required	Author's response
AU1	Please provide publisher location for Draper et al. (1988).	
AU2	Please provide volume for Stearns (1976).	

Note:

If you are using material from other works please make sure that you have obtained the necessary permission from the copyright holders and that references to the original publications are included.

Uncorrected Proof